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STRATEGIC VALUE OF HER WEST INDIAN POSSESSIONS TO THE UNITED STATES.

If "in time of peace we must prepare for war," it becomes necessary also in time of peace to contemplate the dangers to which we may be exposed in war, for only thus shall we make our preparations adequate, and along the right lines. If in the following article emphasis is laid upon the dangers rather than the advantages of certain conditions, it is but to bring out forcibly the means by which the dangers may be averted, as well as the advantages reaped.

In its broadest sense, strategy deals with all acts, diplomatic or political, civil or military, that make ultimately for a nation's strength in war. The accepted leaders of our people expect the policy of expansion in the West Indies and elsewhere to yield great increase of trade and new opportunities for the profitable use of American capital. It is generally believed that this policy will increase our national prosperity and our influence for the world's good in the council of nations.

Before passing to the more limited case of our West Indian acquisitions, it will be well to contemplate the general but strictly military consequences of possessing islands beyond the sea. Prior to 1898 the United States was the strongest of all nations *on the defensive*. Our population was self-sustaining and could not be reduced to submission through blockade. On account of the difficulties of ocean transport no army could land and sustain itself for a successful campaign within our borders. The European power with which most frequently we had had serious complications in the past, and which most of all nations possessed means to annoy and harass our coasts, was deterred from any hostile undertakings through fear of losing Canada. President Cleveland could be sure that his Venezuelan message would provoke no war.

Notwithstanding our great defensive strength we should

have been in a very embarrassing position if at that time we had been called upon to enforce the Monroe Doctrine as against Germany, France or Russia. These nations were each superior to us upon the sea, and where else against either one of them might we even have attempted a hostile blow? We must admit that our *offensive* military strength, except as against England in Canada, was insignificant. This certainly appears to have been a dangerous situation for a nation traditionally attached to the Monroe Doctrine.

When we acquired possessions beyond the sea, we lost in great measure our splendid defensive strength, while we added to our power to strike offensive blows. At the same time that we increased our ability to sustain the Monroe Doctrine, and thus reduced the probability of war due to its violations, we increased the probability of war due to other causes, for we entered into contact with the world's great powers at a greatly increased number of points.

Whether the gain of offensive and loss of defensive strength leave us with a balance to the good is, in a measure, an indeterminate problem, the unknown quantities being indicated in the following questions :

1. Who will be our antagonist?
2. What preparations shall we make, in peace, to reap advantages from our new conditions?

In a war to-day with a great commercial power, equal or inferior to us in naval strength, we should undoubtedly find our acquisitions a distinct gain. But in a war with a power of considerably greater naval strength we should find that we had but acquired points vulnerable to attack, and several burning problems now agitating the public mind would be speedily solved by our opponent.

The relation of sea power to over-sea possessions may be briefly stated in the light of history and of European policies. Of the five great European powers Russia alone has pursued a policy that enables her to ignore the command of the sea. With unorganized and inferior peoples upon her

eastern and southeastern borders, she has been able to extend her limits by the absorption of contiguous continental territory whose inhabitants are quickly assimilated. Why did Russia part with the Kurile Islands in 1875, and with Alaska in 1867, if it was not to divest herself of distant possessions, recognized as sources of weakness to a nation whose military strength lay upon the land? And what isolated possessions does she now maintain vulnerable to British attack? It seems written upon the wall that, when land communication between Russia and India shall possess military advantages over water communication between Great Britain and India, the day of British rule in India shall pass.

Compare, further, the courses of the Spanish and Boer wars. Spain was vulnerable because of her outlying possessions. Her navy was not far inferior to ours, and her trained army was many times larger, yet Spain was overwhelmed in four months in battles that occurred far from the Spanish peninsula. On the other hand the Boers, with no navy and with but a handful of men, have sustained themselves for years against an antagonist almost infinitely stronger, because the Boer territorial possessions were compact and distant from the enemy's base.

Napoleon conquered Egypt in 1799, but the defeat of the French fleet at Aboukir drove him back to France. And why did Napoleon sell Louisiana to the United States but because that master of strategy recognized it as a source of weakness to France.

Another example is seen in the conduct of British military operations in 1781. In the month of March of that year De Grasse sailed westward with thirty-six ships of the line, a sufficient force to give the allies command of the sea on the American coast. In the same month an English fleet sailed from Portsmouth under Admiral Darby. If the latter fleet had gone to North America the command of the sea there would have been Great Britain's, Cornwallis need not have surrendered at Yorktown and we might have been

British subjects to-day. Why did not Darby sail for North America? Because Gibraltar in that event would have fallen. It was at that moment suffering from the horrors of a protracted siege, and famine and disease were about to cause its surrender. In that war England did not have perfect command of the sea over the combined Dutch, French and Spanish navies, and she found her outlying possessions, even Gibraltar itself, a source of weakness. In Beatson's "Memoirs" occurs the following: "A question was very much agitated in and out of Parliament, namely, whether the interception of the French fleet under the Count de Grasse should not have been the first object of the British fleet under Darby. . . . It would have insured the safety of the British West Indies . . . and the campaign in North America might have had a very different termination."

Mahan, referring to the same question, says: "The conclusion continually recurs. Whatever may be the determining factors in strifes between neighboring continental systems, where a question arises of control over distant regions, politically weak,—whether they be crumbling empires, anarchical republics, colonies, isolated military posts or islands below a certain size,—it must ultimately be decided by naval power, by the organized military force afloat, which represents the communications that form so prominent a feature in all strategy. . . . Upon this will depend the control of the Central American Isthmus, if that question take a military coloring."

The fact must be emphasized that all authorities agree upon this one point, that neither fortifications nor men can hold for more than a short time any possession distant from the primary base, unless the line of communications be kept open. And to keep the line of communications open means to obtain and retain the command of the sea.

Colonel Sir George Clarke, a great British strategist, has written an account of our recent war with Spain from which the following is quoted: "On the other hand, Spain was

committed to the defence of Cuba, which, as in all such cases, was possible only if maritime communication with the mother country could be maintained. Writing in June, 1897, Captain Mahan referred to 'the pre-eminent intrinsic advantages of Cuba, or rather of Spain in Cuba;' but these advantages could be turned to account only if naval supremacy in West Indian waters could be asserted. Assuming the latter condition, Porto Rico, with the fortified port of San Juan, 1,000 miles from Havana and 5,300 miles from Cadiz, was also a strategic point of importance. Failing this condition, both Cuba and Porto Rico were necessarily sources of weakness and their fall was merely a question of time depending upon their power of military resistance on shore."

The following extracts are from an anonymous British source. The author is vouched for by Brassey and his views are well expressed and harmonious with current expert opinion:

"It is often said, when an additional station is proposed, that a new establishment, if it does not do any good, will at any rate not do any harm. The worst of this statement is that it is not true. Every station beyond the requisite minimum not only does do harm, but also in war may be the cause of much and grievous harm. In peace time its maintenance causes useless expenditure and complicates the storage and issue of supplies. Many stations of the class in question produce few of the articles deposited in their magazines; none produce all, some produce none. In certain cases the local production of food is not enough for their regular inhabitants, much less for their inhabitants plus their garrisons. It is obvious, therefore, that in time of war the necessary 'stream of supplies and reinforcements' must flow to them with the least possible interruption. In other words, their communications must be kept open. As the line of these communications runs across the sea, the duty of keeping them open must be discharged by the navy, and by the

navy alone. Argument and experience both show what a heavy burden this is for a fleet. Should any one wish to learn the verdict of history on this question let him turn to the case of Darby's 'relief' of Gibraltar, and let him note the connection of De Grasse's movements with it, and its general effect on the campaign."

Some of the lessons we should learn from history are then the following:

First.—A nation of any considerable size and military spirit, compact as to its territorial possessions, even if without a navy, is practically unconquerable if it possesses the advantage of remoteness from its enemy's primary base.

Second.—As corollary to the proposition above stated, it may be held that a nation possessed of the predominant sea-power may add to its isolated colonial possessions *ad libitum*. With its fleets "in being," it is almost if not quite as easy to protect one hundred as ten outlying possessions, or if not to protect them during all phases of war, at least to end the war with its original possessions.

Third.—Outlying possessions of any nation are in time of war at the mercy of an adversary possessing decided control of the sea.

These truths are almost self-evident. It was the dictum of Von Moltke that the first principles of strategy do not rise above the level of common sense. The practical conclusion forced upon us is that if we would surely profit by our possessions abroad we must build and maintain a navy equal to any but Great Britain's. We must still rely upon Canada as a sufficient bond that Great Britain will preserve the peace, for no one at this time would venture to commit our country to a contest of expenditures for naval supremacy with that great empire of the sea. The military value of any outlying possession is determined by its position relative to lines of communication.

In the West Indies, England holds Jamaica and Santa Lucia, and France holds Martinique. Cuba (for naval pur-

poses), Porto Rico, and I believe we may say St. Thomas, belong to the United States. Santo Domingo, belonging to no great power, might be seized by any in case it came to have a war-time importance. There are no other West Indian islands of any special present strategic value.

Cuba possesses several excellent harbors, among them Havana, Cienfuegos and Santiago. Havana lies upon the flank of the Straits of Florida and Santiago close to the Windward Passage.

Santo Domingo has excellent harbors at Mole St. Nicholas and Samana Bay, near the Windward and Moïna passages, respectively.

Porto Rico, lying between the Mona and Anegada passages, has upon the main island no harbors that are especially fit for naval stations, although there are several that might be used at a pinch. San Juan harbor lies so close to the sea that an enemy might destroy docks and the like by bombardment. Fajardo is very open, but might be made to serve if expensive breakwaters were constructed. Ponce and Mayaguez harbors are also very open to the sea.

Culebra, a small island to the east of and pertaining to Porto Rico, possesses an excellent harbor, better probably for war purposes than any in Porto Rico, and very nearly if not quite as good as the harbor at St. Thomas. Culebra is uninhabited and lies, as does St. Thomas, close to the Anegada passage.

There is such a thing as an embarrassment of riches in the way of harbors suited for naval bases. In the late war our navy would have been seriously inconvenienced at Santiago had not the neighboring Spanish harbor of Guantanamo served it as a temporary base. It is probably true that we should not purchase St. Thomas did we know that she would remain the possession of a neutral power. It is readily seen that every harbor we own which is suitable for naval purposes by conformation, depth and position, unless

fortified or made secure through command of the sea, **may** be utilized by an enemy for hostile operations.

If other things were nearly equal a naval station in Porto Rico might conceivably have great advantage over one at St. Thomas. Porto Rico might be made self-sustaining during blockade, which St. Thomas could never be, and if our authorities determine to establish a naval station at San Juan, for example, it would be a military measure of great importance to encourage the people of the island, by bounties or otherwise, to become a food exporting people. It would be a further exhibition of military foresight if we so endeared the population to our institutions that they would fight an invader in the way a people fight for home and liberty.

In the event of war with a superior naval power, as the latter might assume command of the sea in any part of the world, any naval station of ours there would find its communications with home ports broken. At a time, by a method, and with a force of his own choosing, the enemy could attack, and he could reinforce and bring up supplies at will. The fall of our naval station could be but a matter of time unless it were situated upon a self-sustaining island possessing a large and devoted population.

The value of a naval station upon a line of communications may be summed up as follows:

1. It constitutes a base, due to the immediate proximity of which an inferior force may raid the commerce of an enemy or protect its own commerce.

2. It tends to deter the enemy from passing by to engage in other operations. Like an army, a war fleet must keep open its line of communications. For upon it will be passing at all times, in one direction or the other, dispatch boats, colliers, supply ships, crippled war vessels and reinforcements.

The Windward, Mona and Anegada passages are the only navigable breaks in the northern barrier enclosing the Caribbean Sea.

When an isthmian canal shall have been constructed it will be approached from Europe most conveniently by the Anegada passage, and from Atlantic ports of the United States by the Windward and Mona passages. Each passage will become the highway of a great commerce.

No matter how strongly the isthmian canal may be fortified it would, in war, serve us no purpose—indeed, through war, we might lose it entirely—if our fleet could not control its approaches.

In this connection it may be observed that if our fleet did control such approaches the only fortifications needed would appear to be of a minor character designed to prevent raids.

In closing we may sum up the case as follows: The possession of distant islands weakens the United States defensively. So also would the construction of an isthmian canal without the building of an adequate navy. For offensive operations as bases for our mobile force—the navy—distant islands, properly located, increase our strength materially. The construction of an isthmian canal would also add to our offensive strength in that it would tend to facilitate the distribution and concentration of our offensive arm.

The main point is that no possible good, in war, can result from canal or our West Indian possessions unless we possess an adequate navy.

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